

# Pragmatic Approaches to Learning Objectives

## A Survey of Writing Instructors

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### INTRODUCTION

This exploratory project seeks to understand the practical ways that teachers incorporate instructional documents and frameworks, like learning objectives, into their pedagogies and classroom practices. Specifically, this researcher conducts a survey that asks:

*How do instructors approach learning objectives in praxis?*

The diverse disciplinary make-up of Writing Studies' programs/instructors provides an opportunity for examining learning objectives, which have a 10-year presence in many of the department's courses, including its most two offered sections of

- WRIT 1301 – University Writing (learning outcomes)
- WRIT 3562W – Technical and Professional Writing (course goals)

### SURVEY METHODS

This Qualtrics Online survey on the use of learning objectives in undergraduate WRIT courses collects three types of data:

- Teaching experience in writing
- Instructional usage of outcomes/goals
- Instructional evaluations of outcomes/goals

The survey questionnaire benefits from a large and diverse pool of Writing Studies instructors. With the help of the First-Year and Advanced Writing program directors the survey distribution timeline is as follows

- Dispersed on March 03, 2017 (listservs/word-of-mouth)
- Last call on April 03-07, 2017 (listservs/email groups)



The survey data for this poster was generated using Qualtrics software, Version of Qualtrics. Copyright © 2017 Qualtrics. Qualtrics and all other Qualtrics product or service names are registered trademarks or trademarks of Qualtrics, Provo, UT, USA. <http://www.qualtrics.com>

### CONTENT ANALYSIS METHODS

The researcher uses qualitative content analysis (QCA) to examine instructor responses to their usage of learning objectives for WRIT 1301 and WRIT 3562W because QCA is an unobtrusive method (Krippendorff, 2013) and it allows for more of an interpretative text analysis (Kohlbacher, 2006). To conduct QCA, the researcher chose to input all text-field data into NVivo 11 Plus. These sources are analyzed using word frequency and collocation text queries.



NVivo qualitative data analysis Software;  
QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10, 2012.

### SURVEY RESULTS

The month-long survey collection period results:

- 25 out of ~80 writing instructors participated
- 16 instructors completed the entire survey

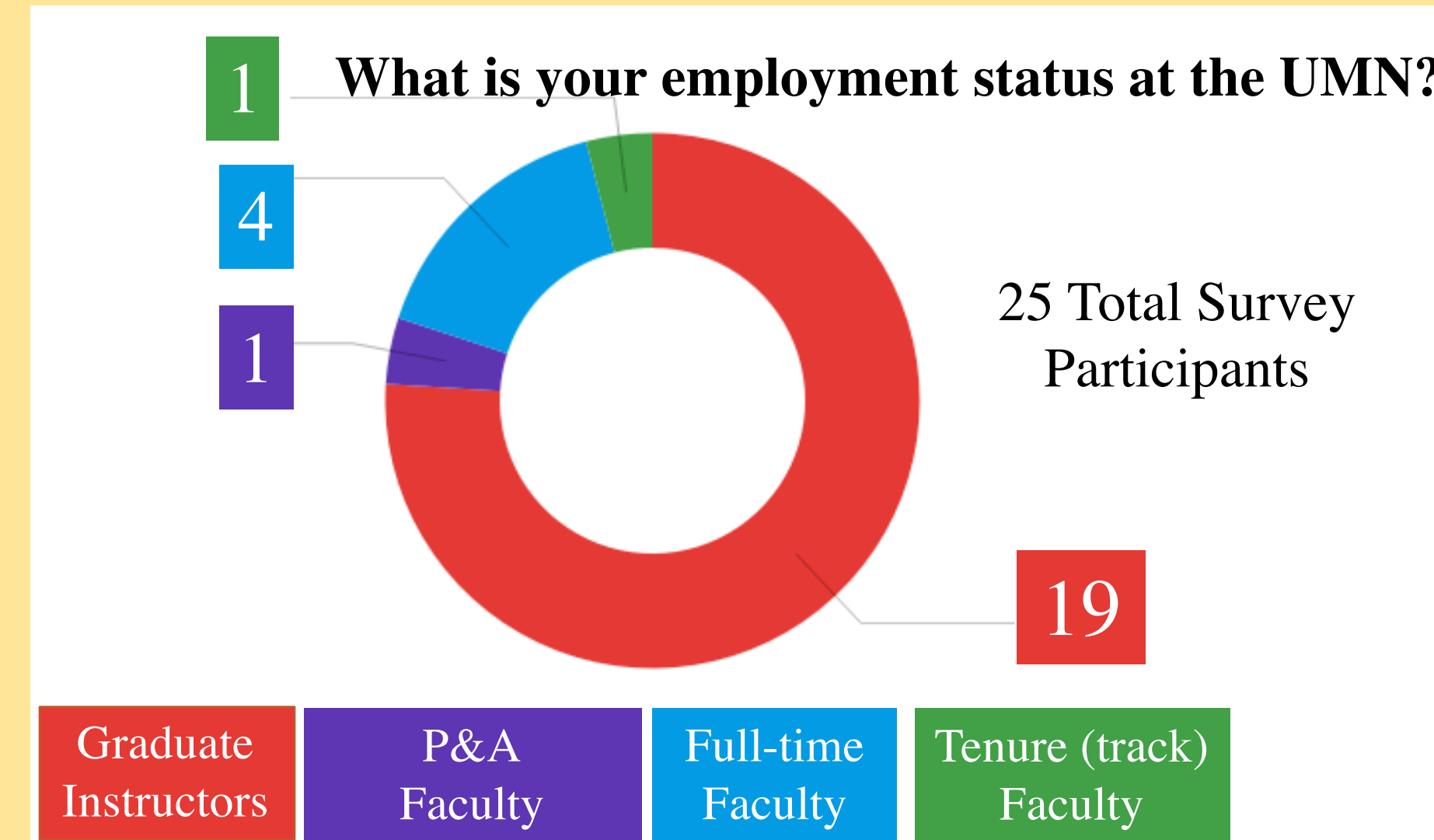


Figure 1. What is your employment status at the university?

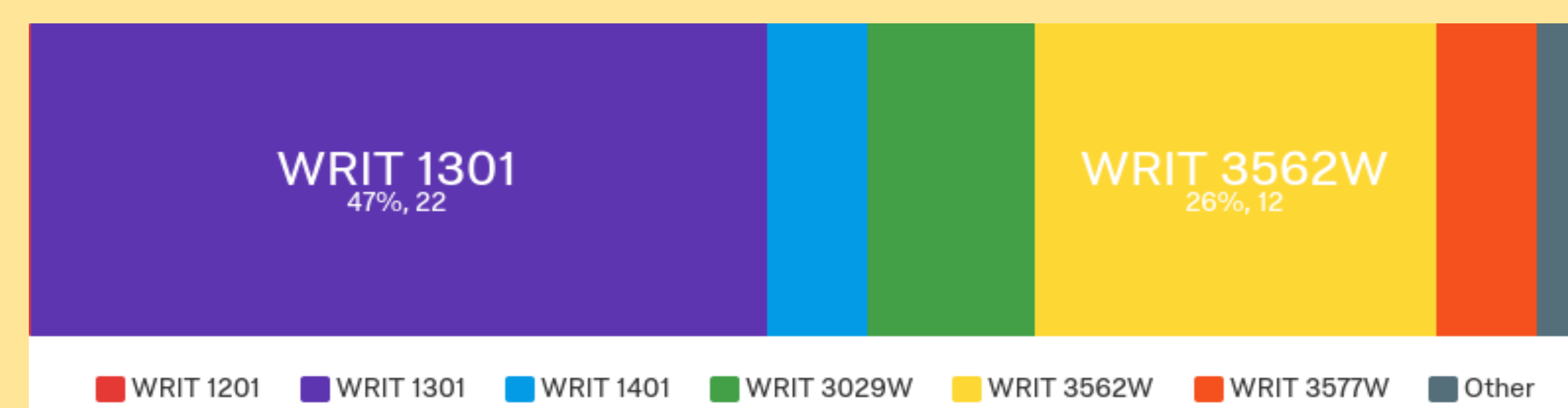


Figure 2. What WRIT courses have you taught at the University of Minnesota?

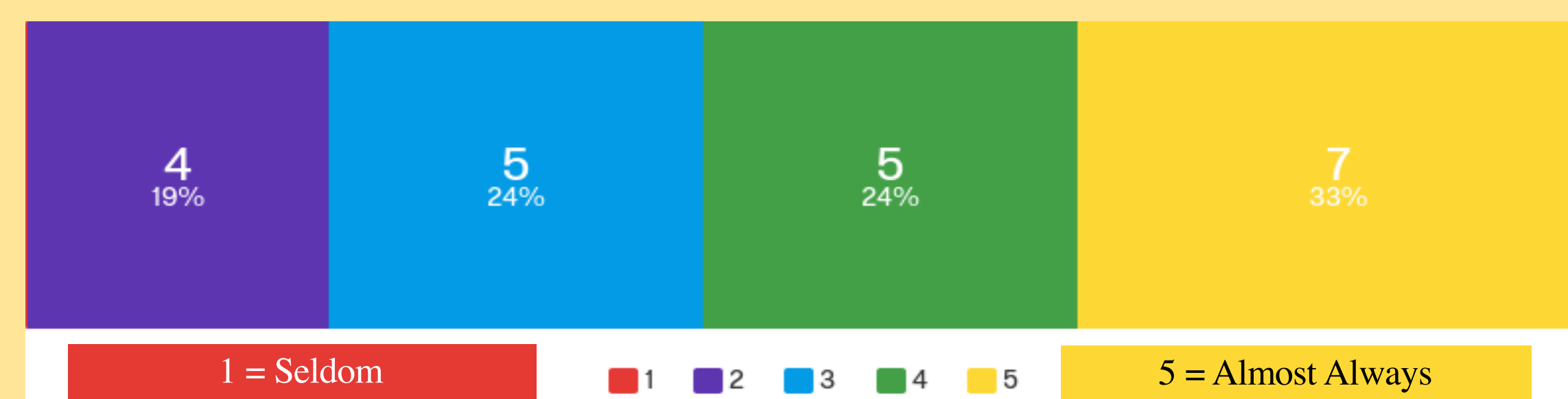


Figure 3. Throughout a semester, how often do you use WRIT course outcomes/goals?

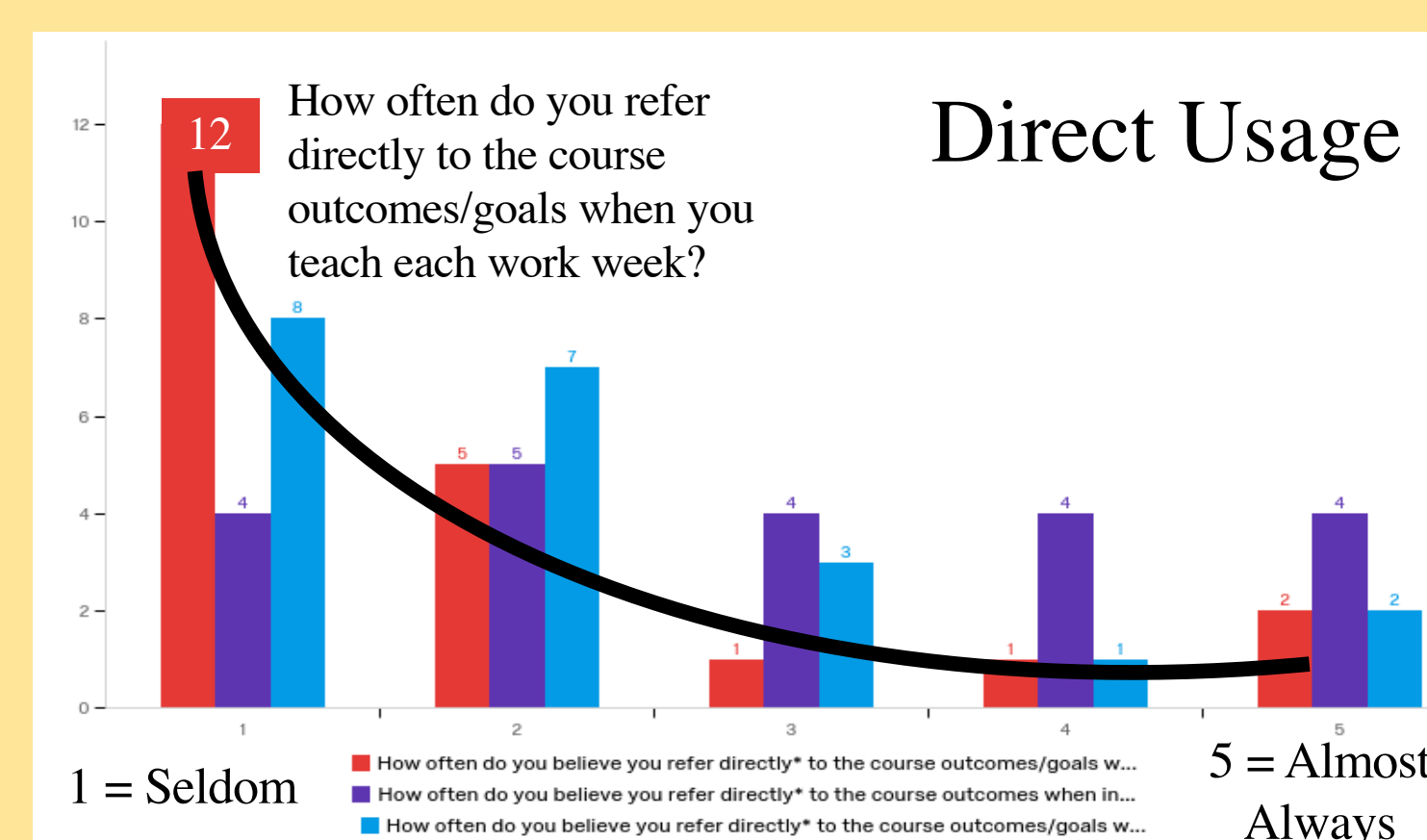


Figure 4. How often to you refer directly to outcomes/goals?

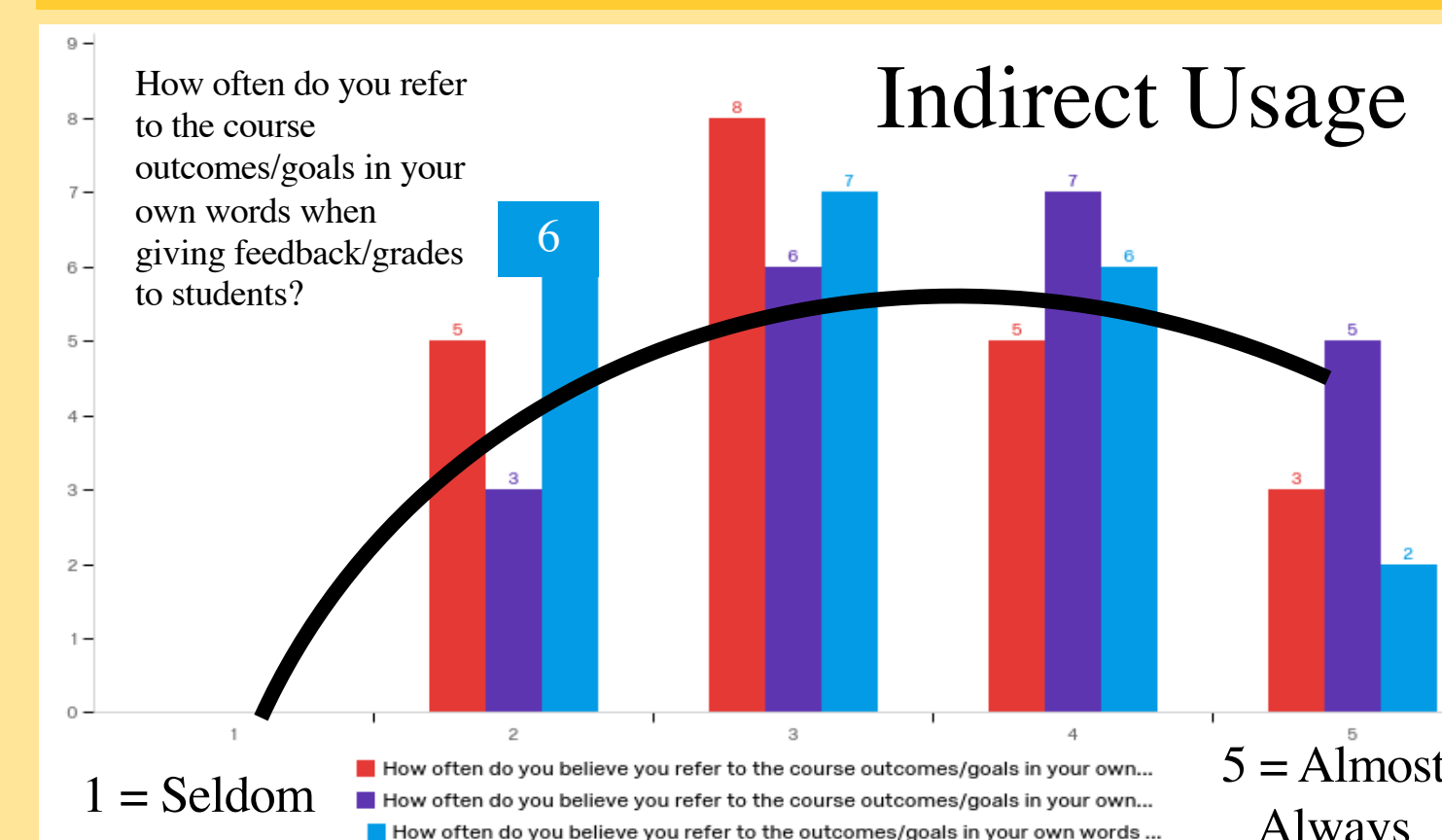


Figure 5. How often do you refer indirectly to outcomes/goals?

The Qualtrics graphs capture compelling results:

- Many instructors hold a temporary position in our writing programs.
- Instructors have an engaged stake in the development of our writing programs.
- There is a significant distinction between direct and indirect usage of the course outcomes or goals when teaching.

### Collocation of “Use” (Q18-19, 21-24, & 29-31)

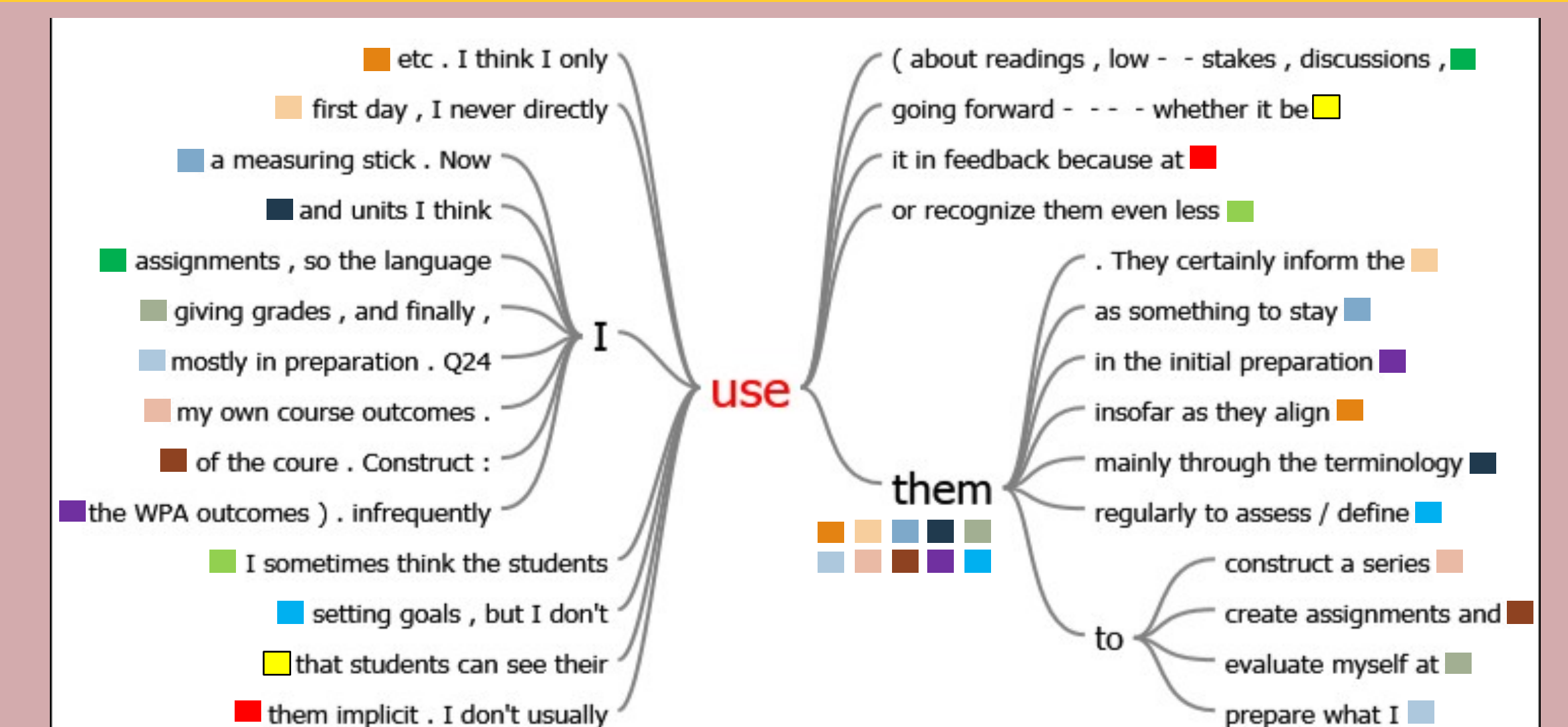


Figure 6. Collocation of “Use” from responses to Questions 18-19, 21-24, & 29-31

### DISCUSSION

This exploratory project provides an unexpected abundance of information and valuable insights from the Department of Writing Studies instructors.

- *None* of the instructors responded that they seldom refer to the course learning objectives throughout an entire course (see fig. 3).
- A majority of instructors estimated that they frequently make direct and/or indirect use of the learning objectives during a semester of teaching.

It's a real conversation starter to suggest that learning objectives do have *some* apparent value to instructors.

- Figures 4 & 5 suggest that certain learning objectives are not worded in a way that instructors tend to make clear in the writing classroom.

A strategic direction using this data could include updating the language of learning objectives to invite instructors to use them directly in the classroom.

In closing, this survey on learning objectives gives way, as the best research should, to more questions:

1. How can instructors add value to the provided learning objectives? What about design/visuals?
2. How would a periodic update to the language of learning objectives using stakeholders' input help?

This researcher's hope is that these survey results and questions be used to start conversations and strategic directions forward for the continued improvement of the Department of Writing Studies' programs.